

Lessons in Perspective-Taking: Embedding Meaningful CSR in Marketing Students

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Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is an integral component of both corporate strategy (PwC report 2016) and business school curricula (Nicholls et al 2013). The debate is no longer whether CSR should be embraced but rather how best to prepare marketing students for meaningful and authentic design and practice of CSR. CSR refers to a firm's activities that enhance the wellbeing of its key stakeholders (Wood 1991), and the consumer is a key stakeholder for marketers. I argue that the embrace of authentic CSR that enhances consumer wellbeing requires marketing students to actively practice perspective-taking when designing and executing CSR-focused marketing activities. I first discuss the meaning of CSR perspective-taking for marketing students, and then discuss how such perspective-taking abilities can be instilled in students.

Perspective-taking:

Perspective-taking refers to actively considering others' mental and other subjective states (Todd & Galinsky 2014). It enhances intergroup understanding and evaluation of others, while attenuating intergroup biases and stereotypes. These effects are robust over time and lead to taking action on behalf of others. Therefore, perspective-taking is an essential ability for future marketers designing and implementing consumer-oriented CSR policies and practices.

CSR-focused perspective-taking differs from merely understanding consumers. Typically marketing courses teach students to understand consumers so as to influence consumer attitudes, purchase and usage behavior. The ultimate goal is to further the firm's bottom line (Cayla and Arnould 2013; Hattula et al 2015; Said et al 2015;). However, the objective of CSR-focused perspective-taking is to contribute to stakeholders', i.e., the consumers' "bottom line" - consumer wellbeing. Therefore, gaining a competitive edge is not the primary objective of such perspective-taking (though it may provide a competitive edge). Further, rather than focusing on creating marketing strategy that acts on consumers (e.g., launch a time-sensitive special offer to drive sales), CSR-focused perspective-taking allows consumers to act on marketers and act for consumers (e.g., realize the occurrence and impact of sub-optimal purchase decisions in response to time-sensitive offers and design an offer to avoid such impact).

Teaching perspective-taking to marketing students:

Motivating students to perspective-take requires providing incentives, structure, and flexibility (Todd & Galinsky 2014). Marketing educators should use graded assignments to train students in perspective-taking and in the use of this skill to create consumer wellbeing enhancing marketing strategy. Such assignments will have four broad stages – training in perspective-taking, entering the field, perspective-taking, developing marketing strategy based on this experience (Figure 1). Training in perspective-taking begins with an immersion in the details of a consumer's domain-specific experience (Todd & Galinsky 2014). For example, understanding the perspective of green consumers requires an immersion in the details of all aspects of their green consumption activities. This immersion is then followed by exercises in meta-cognition (Kaplan et al 2013)

and deep reflection (Schön 1983) - self-reflection and critical-reflection - facilitated through dialogue and discussion (Cunliffe 2004; Hibbert & Cunliffe 2015). The outcome of this process of immersion, meta-cognition and reflection is the ability to perspective-take and participate in counterfactual thinking (Celuch & Saxby 2013) that provides alternatives ways of marketing i.e.,

CSR-focused marketing.

Training should begin with students practicing perspective-taking on themselves. This requires them to immerse themselves in their own specific consumption experience, be deliberate and mindful of this experience, maintain a consumption journal, and reflect deeply on the experience and their reaction to it at every stage. Subsequent rounds of training can ask students to practice perspective-taking on a classmate, or use fully-formed characters in film, TV, novels etc.. In every case, the deep immersion in the details of specific consumption experience must be followed with meta-cognition, deep reflection, and deliberate counterfactual thinking and perspective-taking. In parallel, students and instructors should also identify a consumer group or an issue that can benefit significantly from CSR-focused marketing and are willing to be the focus of the assignment (see Table 1).

After practicing perspective-taking and ensuring informed access to one or more members of the consumer group, students enter the field. Perspective-taking requires a time commitment, and therefore students should spend significant periods of time with their chosen consumer(s) at different points during the course. They begin with gathering detailed information on the specific consumption experience under study. This could occur through in-depth conversations, with the consumers, shadowing them during stages of purchase and use, asking them to maintain a diary etc. The meta-cognition and reflective exercises are inter-woven through this process. Students should then be asked to explicate their new perspective, actively undertake counterfactual thinking exercises based on their immersion and reflection, and then integrate this learning with their marketing knowledge to design specific marketing strategies that will benefit their consumer(s). Time and resources permitting, students could also pitch their strategies to relevant businesses that are committed to CSR and are in a position to cater to these specific consumers.

Discussion: While such an approach has tremendous promise, it can also be challenging to design and implement. However, the benefits are likely to far outweigh the costs, and this is a pedagogical approach worth pursuing.

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Table 1: Examples of consumers/groups and consumption issues for perspective-taking exercises

Consumer/group	Consumption issue
Teenagers	Seeking self-esteem through consumption
Seniors	Market access, products designed for them.
Low income	Access to quality products

New immigrants	Marketplace literacy
Young adults	Budget management

Figure 1: Structure of a perspective-taking assignment

